

A GLEAMING NEW SUPERIOR COURT



FILE PHOTO

Gov. George Deukmejian Courthouse, opening Monday in Long Beach, will handle Harbor Area criminal cases, matters once conducted at the closed San Pedro and Beacon Street courthouses and Long Beach cases. Electronic screens, above, display cases for the day.

Facility for Harbor Area, Long Beach cases replaces one of worst buildings in state

By Beatriz E. Valenzuela

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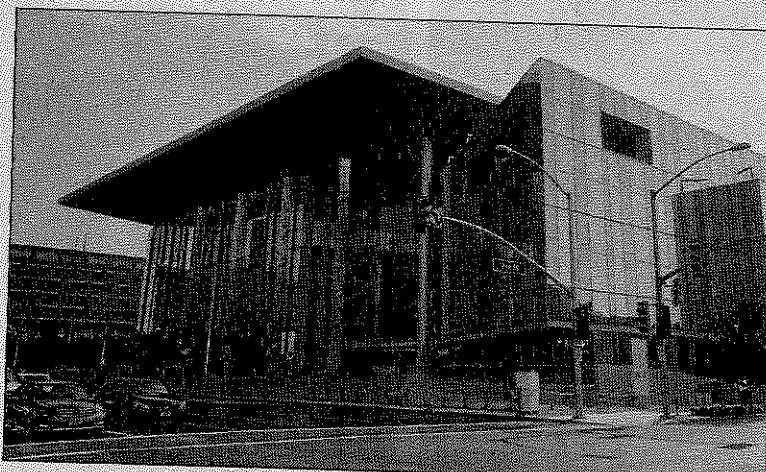
@PTBeatriz on Twitter

Morning lines stretching outside Long Beach Superior Court — described as one of the worst buildings in the state — will be a thing of the past on Monday, when the new Gov. George Deukmejian Courthouse opens nearby.

The gleaming and expansive 531,000-square-foot glass and iron building that boasts 31 courtrooms, updated technological features and better security will handle Long Beach cases, as well as criminal cases from the Harbor Area and matters once conducted at the closed San Pedro and Beacon Street courthouses.

The \$395 million courthouse sits on six acres of land at 275 Magnolia Ave., one block north of the current courthouse that served the public for more than half a century, but has been in disrepair for years.

COURTHOUSE » PAGE 5



FILE PHOTO

The new 531,000-square-foot glass and iron courthouse replaces the nearby existing courthouse. The number of people the building has served since it opened in 1958 has nearly doubled from 344,186 per year to 650,000.

Courthouse

FROM PAGE 3

"I did make a pet of one of the rats," Assistant Supervising Judge Michael Vicencia joked when asked if he would miss anything about the old building.

The final plans for the new building were approved in late 2010 when the city of Long Beach agreed to a unique land swap, officials said.

The old location, at 320,000 square feet, became too small to accommodate the 5,000 people who come through the courthouse on a daily basis, Supervising Judge James Otto said.

The existing location received very low marks from reviewers online, including one man who warned: "Plan to spend at least three hours even if just paying a fine. It's like a Walmart Black Friday every day. Horribly outdated and poor ventilation."

When the existing courthouse opened in 1958, the number of people served by the courthouse was about 344,186 per year. That number has since nearly doubled to 650,000. The new courthouse will hear civil, criminal, family law, unlawful detainer, juvenile delinquency and traffic matters.

While there were efforts to expand the location by adding a wing in the 1970s, court authorities say that hasn't been enough.

In contrast, the entrance of the Gov. George Deukme-



FILE PHOTO

The entryway for the Gov. George Deukmejian Courthouse in Long Beach, which will also serve the Harbor Area, is about 20 feet wide. At least four security berths will allow for smoother checks, officials say.

jian Courthouse is about 20 feet wide with at least four security berths, which officials say will allow for smoother security and weapons checks.

"We waited for what felt like an hour to get in here," said Gabriela Alejandres of Long Beach, who gave a friend a ride to the old Ocean Boulevard courthouse last week for a civil case. "I hope the new place will be better than what we went through today."

Along with the lack of space, another problem with the existing courthouse is damage caused by several earthquakes in the 1990s.

The building was retrofitted, but Vicencia said that even with all the upgrades, the building could withstand a moderate earthquake but would have to be evacuated indefinitely.

In 2005, however, the courthouse received its biggest black eye when a juror suffered a heart attack on the sixth floor and died when firefighters couldn't reach the man quickly, Vicencia said.

Firefighters arrived two minutes after the first 9-1-1 call went out, but due to the

overcrowded and inoperative elevators and escalators that didn't even reach the sixth floor, it took first responders an additional seven minutes to reach the man.

The new courthouse has six public elevators, doubling the number at the current building, as well as escalators and stairs. The courtrooms are equipped with digital projectors that will allow jurors to more easily see evidence, HDMI cables and a media center where journalists can charge various smart devices and have access to the Internet.

The courthouse was built as a public-private partnership. The responsibility of designing, building and financing the project was placed on the developer, Long Beach Judicial Partners. In return, the government will repay the developer over the long term.

The California Administrative Office of the Courts entered into a 35-year pact with Long Beach Judicial Partners, a private team consisting of architects, builders, financiers and facility managers, to build and maintain the courthouse.

The state will start making payments based on the success of the building's operation and maintenance. The state owns the land and the building throughout the contract's 35-year term and will continue to retain title at the end of the contract.

State and local officials have lauded the public-private partnership concept as an innovative, cost-effective way to build the courthouse.

Local officials, meanwhile, are eager to leave the old building behind.

"We've been waiting for this for some time, and it's been a long time coming," Vicencia said.

OPIN

EDITORIALS

A fix for jail overcrowding

By being smarter, L.A. County could free up space and keep the worst offenders locked up.

WITH SOME county jail inmates serving only a fraction of their sentences due to overcrowding, as *The Times* reported Sunday, Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich has called on Sheriff Lee Baca to provide ideas on how to increase the portion of their terms that inmates actually spend behind bars. The supervisor asked specifically about contracting for more lockups throughout the state — while failing to mention an option that could immediately free up space to house the most serious offenders.

What's more, that option can be exercised swiftly by Antonovich and his fellow supervisors. The key is smarter handling of an entirely different population of inmates.

Thousands of beds are currently occupied by people awaiting their trials in jail instead of at home simply because they can't afford to post bail. Money, not public safety, is often what determines whether someone charged with a crime walks free and helps his lawyer prepare a defense or stays locked up.

AB 109, the same legislation that gave counties new responsibilities and new funding for dealing with some felons previously handled by the state, also authorized sher-

iffs to release pretrial detainees, on electronic monitoring when appropriate, even if they can't pay their bail. The catch is that the sheriffs must first be given the go-ahead by their county boards of supervisors — and Los Angeles County's supervisors haven't budged.

The largest segment of the county's jail population is made up of about 10,000 pretrial detainees. Not all of them could be safely released pending trial, because some are deemed violent or severely mentally ill and some are being held at the request of other jurisdictions. But about 1,000 could be safely released to free up space for other purposes. Failing to take the steps necessary to free up that space while releasing members of that other, smaller population — people already convicted, some of serious and violent crimes — is bad thinking, bad planning and bad public safety.

Prosecutors and judges also have options. They currently arrange and accept plea bargains that result in felony convictions, including for serious and violent crimes, but don't result in felony sentences. Convicts instead get conditional probation sentences that require up to a year in county jail. It is those offenders who are currently serving at most a small portion of their jail time. That population makes up a scant 6% of jail inmates, and could easily be accommodated if Los Angeles County's elected officials — the district attorney, the judges, the sheriff and, in this case most of all, the Board of Supervisors — put smart management of the jails ahead of habit and blame.

County jails face new U.S. probe

Civil rights investigation escalates federal scrutiny of deputies' use of force.

By ROBERT FATURECHI
AND JACK LEONARD

Federal authorities have opened a civil rights probe into whether Los Angeles County sheriff's deputies have engaged in a pattern of abuse of inmates, according to a letter sent to county officials this week.

The so-called pattern or practice investigation marks a new level of scrutiny for the nation's largest jail system, which is the subject of an ongoing FBI criminal investigation into allegations of excessive force and other misconduct.

The letter, sent from the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division to the county on Thursday, said federal authorities opened the civil probe after becom-

ing "increasingly concerned about use of force and alleged abuse by jail deputies and staff." The investigation will be conducted separately from the FBI's criminal probe, the letter said.

County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas called the new probe "a very significant concern."

At the same time, the Justice Department will also assess whether the Sheriff's Department has failed to adequately house and care for mentally ill inmates — an issue federal authorities first identified as a problem in 1997. "A growing number of prisoners with serious mental illness continue to be housed in obsolete and dilapidated conditions at Men's Central Jail," the letter stated.

[See Jails, A44]

A new federal probe of jails

[Jails, from AAI]

The letter was signed by Acting Assistant Atty. Gen. Jocelyn Samuels and U.S. Atty. Andre Birotte Jr., who heads the department's Los Angeles-area office and is also overseeing the criminal investigation into the jails.

Sheriff Lee Baca's spokesman, Steve Whitmore, said the Sheriff's Department would fully cooperate with the federal civil rights probe. He said the department has made significant reforms recently in an effort to deal with excessive force by jailers and is continuing to do so. "We question the allegations of use of force," he said. "It is being tracked now like it's never been tracked before. Use of force is down by more than half."

Whitmore also noted that the letter acknowledged that the department had made "critical improvements in the delivery of mental health care at the jail" during the last decade.

He said Baca has long held that the mentally ill should not be housed in the jails but in other settings where they can be given proper care and the necessary psychotropic medication administered by mental health professionals.

Despite the improvements, federal authorities also said "significant problems remain." The Justice Department, for example, cited an increase in inmate suicides, including at least five this year.

The launch of the new probe comes just two months after federal authorities wrapped up another civil rights investigation into the Sheriff's Department—finding that deputies in the Antelope Valley harassed and intimidated blacks, Latinos and other residents. In that probe, federal officials did find a pattern of sheriff's deputies using unreasonable force, intimidating and "widespread" unlawful detentions and searches. Many of the findings involved residents who received low-income subsidized housing.

In their new civil rights probe, federal authorities could take a number of actions if they were to find a pattern of constitutional violations in the jails.

They could seek a consent decree in which the Justice Department and the county would agree to a set of reforms that a federal judge would approve and a court-appointed official would monitor. The Los Angeles Police Department operated under such a decree for about a decade after the Rampart corruption scandal. Law enforcement agencies typically bristle under that kind of burdensome, and sometimes prolonged, federal scrutiny.

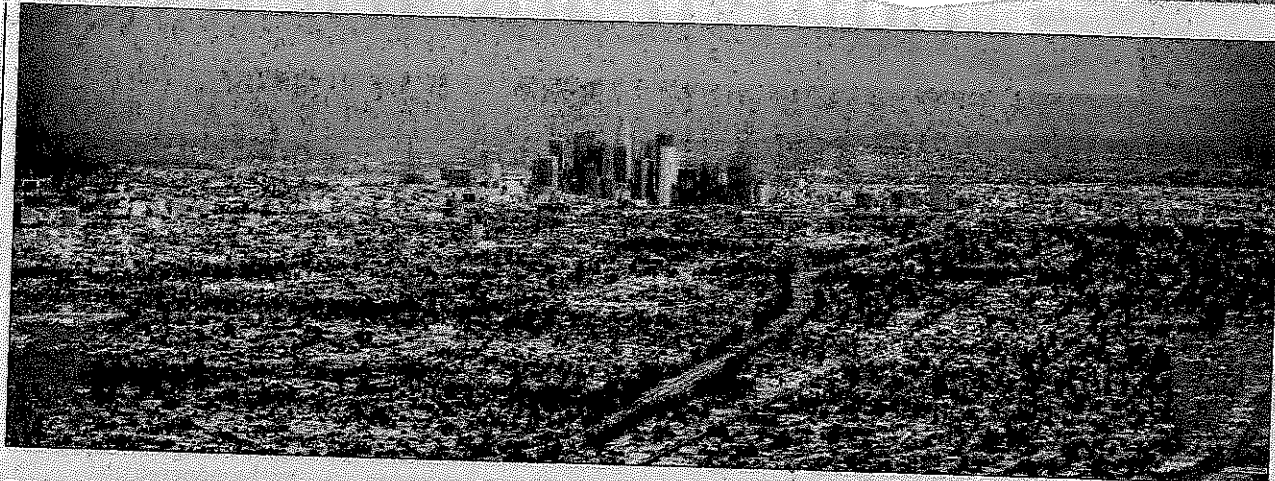
Other, less burdensome settlements could involve formal legal arrangements in which the two sides agree on a set of reforms but could do so without a formal court-appointed monitor.

The county and federal authorities entered into such an agreement in 2002 after a Justice Department investigation found that conditions relating to mental health care in the county's jails violated the federal rights of prisoners, and jail staff abused mentally ill prisoners. Justice officials will be examining if sheriff's officials have complied with that agreement.

The FBI's criminal probe of jailhouse misconduct has been ongoing since at least 2001 and is expected to be wrapped up by the end of the year. Even before the federal scrutiny, internal sheriff's memos showed that top supervisors were raising alarms about excessive force as far back as 2009. One audit of more than 100 violent encounters with inmates found that deputies crafted narratives "dramatized to justify" force. In some cases, jailers purposely delayed using weapons that could end fights, like pepper spray and stun guns, "to dispense appropriate jailhouse 'justice,'" the report said.

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Los Angeles Times photographs



Michael D. Antonovich

Years in office: 33
Termed-out: 2016

District: Pasadena, Burbank, Glendale, and the Santa Clarita, Antelope and Pomona valleys



Don Knabe

Years in office: 17
Termed-out: 2016

District: Long Beach, South Bay, part of the San Gabriel Valley, Santa Catalina



Gloria Molina

Years in office: 22
Termed-out: 2014

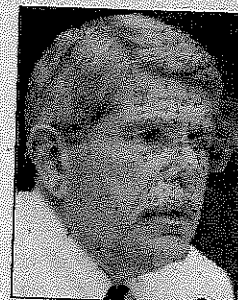
District: Downtown Los Angeles, East Los Angeles, Southeast Los Angeles, part of the San Gabriel Valley



Mark Ridley-Thomas

Years in office: 5
Termed-out: 2020

District: South Los Angeles, Culver City



Zev Yaroslavsky

Years in office: 19
Termed-out: 2014

District: Westside, part of the San Fernando Valley, Santa Monica, Malibu, Mid-City, Hollywood and Venice

5 jobs politicians covet

L.A. County supervisors enjoy an unusual level of power and little oversight. New term limits could change things.

BY SEEMA MEHTA

A prominent Latina fresh from President Obama's Cabinet wants one. A member of the Kennedy clan is eyeing another, as is the woman who made her political mark this year behind a multi-million-dollar media blitz to become Los Angeles' first female mayor.

Seats on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors are among the most coveted, safe and powerful local elected positions in the nation. The five current members have served a total of nearly 100 years, bolstering criticism that the board has been short on

accountability.

But shifts not seen in more than a generation are coming. Four of the "five kings," as board members sometimes are called, will be gone by the end of 2016 because of voter-imposed term limits. And for the first time since the board was created in 1852, the majority of members could be women in three years.

The turnover, starting with elections in June, will change the makeup of a panel whose decisions can affect millions of the poor and needy dependent on a wide range of county social services, as well as taxpayers, businesses and organized labor, which hopes to in-

crease its clout through the coming political campaigns.

At weekly downtown meetings in a cavernous chamber, the supervisors make decisions on law enforcement, healthcare delivery, food safety regulation, taxes and land development that can affect a population larger than that of all but seven states. They spend \$25 billion a year in public money, often with little oversight.

"There's really no checks and balances," said Rep. Janice Hahn (D-San Pedro), whose father served on the panel for four decades and whose family name adorns the county's giant Hall

[See Supervisors, A12]

Change ahead for L.A. County board

[Supervisors, from A1]
of Administration where the board convenes. "They create laws, they execute laws and sometimes they even sit in judgment of their own laws."

The benefits are considerable. Each supervisor is allotted \$3 million a year for staff, cars, office expenses and pet projects, on top of a \$179,000 annual salary.

The public and the media pay less attention to the board than to City Hall leaders two blocks away in the Civic Center, partly because of the dizzyingly complex array of state and federally mandated social programs that officials spend much of their time managing.

Politically, that opacity can be attractive. "You can have a tremendous amount of influence and not run into the buzz saw people run into in more visible offices like City Council or mayor," said

Raphael J. Sorensen, executive director of the Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Institute of Public Affairs at Cal State L.A.

The board's obscurity has prompted one former state lawmaker who is seeking a seat to send out "L.A. County 101" emails explaining members' duties.

"Everywhere I go, when I tell people I'm running for Los Angeles County Supervisor in 2014, they ask, 'What do supervisors do?'" wrote Sheila Kuehl in her first mis-

sive to voters. One recent explainer reeled off a litany of statistics to illustrate the breadth of county responsibilities, including the 16 million books checked out of county libraries, 60,000 marriage licenses issued and 70 million visitors to county beaches annually.

Some contend the relationship between supervisors and the 2 million resi-

dents each represents needs to be fundamentally reset.

"There's a disconnect — that's why I refer to them as kings and queens," said former state Sen. Gloria Romero. "They are in an obscure, hard-to-get-to building in downtown Los Angeles where you have to pay an arm and a leg to park before you walk in and bow down to the majesties that prevail."

"They are invisible to their subjects."

Supervisors say they are in constant contact with cities, community groups and constituents despite the sprawling size of their districts and added responsibilities, including overseeing the county's mass transit system. Board Chairman Mark Ridley-Thomas said he regularly meets with constituents at organized events and less formally in settings such as Sunday church services. He added

that board members have larger staffs than other local elected officials to deal with constituent issues.

Board members wrestle with issues affecting society's most vulnerable — the destitute, the sick, abused children, the mentally ill, said Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, a former Los Angeles City Council member.

"In the city, few if any decisions we made were life-and-death decisions — trim trees now or trim trees in three years," he said. At the county, he added, "I have had many a sleepless night, literally and figuratively, on some of the decisions we've had to make over the years."

Through the decades, entrenched county supervisors have rarely faced serious political challenges. That was partly the argument for term limits approved by voters in 2002.

Now, each board member is limited to three four-year terms. Gloria Molina, who represents the eastern rim of the county, and Yaroslavsky, who represents the Westside and part of the San Fernando Valley, are the first affected and will leave office next year.

Supervisors Don Knabe, who represents southern and coastal communities, and Michael D. Antonovich, who represents the northern area of the county, will be termed out in 2016. Antonovich, the longest-serving member at 33 years, had been on the board more than two decades before term limits were approved. The clock began ticking on his 12-year maximum when he was reelected in 2004.

In early jockeying this year, the contest to replace Yaroslavsky appears to be drawing the most interest from potential high-profile contenders who could mount well-funded campaigns.

"There's really no checks and balances. They create laws, they execute laws and sometimes they even sit in judgment of their own laws."

— REP. JANICE HAHN, whose father served on the panel for four decades

Kuehl, the first openly gay California state legislator and first female speaker pro tem of the Assembly, has announced her candidacy. Also considering entering the race are Wendy Greuel, L.A.'s former controller who lost the city mayor's race in May, former Santa Monica Mayor Bobby Shriver, brother of California's former First Lady Maria Shriver and nephew of President John F. Kennedy, and L.A. Councilman Paul Krekorian.

Kuehl, a former Westside state lawmaker, has raised nearly \$250,000 toward a campaign that some observers say could ultimately cost millions. She is highlighting her experience with statewide issues, which she says closely parallels the duties of a county supervisor.

At this point, in Molina's district, President Obama's former Labor secretary, Hilda Solis, appears to have the field largely to herself. She has raised more than \$300,000.

After serving in the state Legislature, Congress and the Obama administration, Solis said she chose to return to the Los Angeles area to be able to spend more

time with her family.

Born in Silver Lake, Solis grew up in La Puente and was first elected to the Rio Hondo Community College District. She says she would use her state and federal connections to help more people prosper in the county district that includes East L.A. and downtown. "That's what I forged my career in," she said. "I miss that."

The race to replace Antonovich and Krabe, the board's two Republicans, will formally begin in two years. Already, one prominent lobbyist has drawn up a list of more than a dozen theoretical candidates for Krabe's seat, with Harbor area Congresswoman Hahn the most prominent. Hahn sidestepped questions about a possible campaign.

The coming upheaval, combined with the effects of term limits, could alter the political dynamics of the board. Among other things, it could make the body a more traditional, local government steppingstone for career politicians as opposed to a secure, low-profile position of power where officials settle in for decades.

In addition, public employee unions have an opportunity to build more sympathetic alliances on the board if they back winners in districts being opened by the departures of Yaroslavsky and Molina. Democrats who have shown independent streaks on fiscal and labor issues, Solis generally is seen as a strong friend of labor and has already garnered major union endorsements.

"Labor will probably have the best deal they've ever had in terms of having two sitting champions out of five board members," said Jaline Regalado, professor emerita of political science at Cal State L.A.

Proponents of term limits believe the changes will bring much-needed new blood to the board. But critics warn they could increase politicking and dysfunction and elevate the influence of lobbyists and bureaucrats, similar to the problems some argue have been created in Sacramento.

Some officials, including Hahn, say it can take more than 12 years for supervisors to truly leave a mark on their district and the county. Many of her father's signature accomplishments — Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital, creating the state's first paramedic program, establishing freeway emergency call boxes — took place in his second and third decades in office, she noted.

"My dad was elected to his 10th term before he retired, so when people asked what he thought about term limits, he thought 10 terms was probably good enough," Hahn said.

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Prison problems move into county lockups

Mon 9-9-12 L.A. Times

State's plan to ease crowding brings more hard-core offenders and violence to jails.

By PAIGE ST. JOHN

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Jerry Brown's plan approved two years ago to ease crowding in state prisons has left county jails struggling with hard-core felons sentenced to spend years, even dec-

ades, in facilities meant to hold criminals for no more than a year.

County sheriffs warn that these long-term inmates are more than they can handle. They say they pose security threats in their already-crowded lockups and invite the same costly class-action lawsuits over medical care and services that now dog state prisons.

"Our facilities were never constructed to manage an inmate for longer than a year," said Alameda County

Sheriff Greg Ahern, president of the state sheriffs association, describing jails statewide.

Before the passage of AB 109 — the 2011 law pushed by the governor to reduce California's prison population — jail sentences in California were limited to one year. Now, California has had more than 1,300 inmates sentenced to five years or more in jails, according to a sheriffs association survey and reports by individual jails.

The situation is most prevalent in Los Angeles County, where jails hold more than 530 inmates who have been sentenced to jail terms of five years or more, 43 of them for more than a decade.

The most extreme of those: a top-level trafficker for a Mexican drug cartel caught with a shipment of 211 kilos of cocaine. He has been ordered to spend 42 years in the jail.

Shasta County Sheriff Tom Bosenko, who now has 11 inmates serving sentences of five years or more, said they have been accompanied by a rise in jail violence, including inmate-on-inmate assaults. "We now have a hierarchy of inmates who have a prison culture," he said.

AB 109 created a list of about 500 felonies that would no longer be punished by time in state prison but in county jail. Counties were told they would be sent only those who have committed nonviolent and nonserious crimes.

[See Jails, A7]

State action created jail problems

Los Angeles Times

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2013 4

[Jails, from A1]

But that list failed to account for California's drug sentencing enhancements, which factor in the amount of drugs involved.

As a result, most of the people sentenced to the longest jail terms, of a decade or more, committed crimes involving substantial amounts of drugs, the sheriffs survey found.

The governor initially dismissed the complaints. He now acknowledges there is a problem, but efforts to fix it have become mired in the politics of prison crowding.

Nicholas Gaona's ties to a Mexican drug cartel so unnerved jurors during his 2011 trial that they sent a note to the judge asking whether their lives were in danger. The day federal agents raided Gaona's stash houses in Los Angeles, they found cocaine worth \$21 million on the street.

At sentencing, the judge tallied up the number of conspiracies and the weight of the drugs in each. That led to a 42-year sentence. Still, with no weapon used in the crime, the narcotics trafficker is classified on paper as a nonserious offender.

"He should be in state prison," said John Bur, the federal drug agent in charge of the task force that brought the case.

Los Angeles County officials say they can handle such high-level criminals.

One way jailers keep inmates occupied is by offering classes. The county has 62 education programs, from dog grooming to brick-laying, as well as jobs that inmates can fill. The programs not only provide inmates a skill that can lead to a job on the outside, but also keep them busy and lower the incidence of jail violence.



RICH PEDRONCELLI Associate

GOV. JERRY BROWN is joined at a news conference on prison overcrowding by Assembly Speaker John Pérez (D-Los Angeles), left, and Senate Minority Leader Robert Huff (R-Diamond Bar), right.

ter both sheriffs and state officials expressed concern about the types of inmates they would be sent.

A legislative analyst warned that counties would take advantage of the trade and give California their

worst, costliest inmates.

Of course they would, sheriffs lobbyist Nick Warner said at a legislative hear-

ing. "We can't handle th

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But those classes were designed for a transient population. Before AB 109, the average stay in the Los Angeles jail was 54 days, and most classes are meant to be finished in 12 weeks.

It is possible for Gaona and other long-term inmates in Los Angeles to just keep repeating classes.

"It would be like a job," said Capt. Mike Bornman, in charge of the Los Angeles jail education curriculum.

Jail officials would not say how Gaona is spending his time.

The capacity of California jails to absorb long-term inmates varies.

The Los Angeles County jail in Castaic that houses Gaona is a medium-security campus where inmates can move about most of the day.

Other California jails, including others in Los Angeles, confine inmates to cells, making it difficult to move them around and limiting access to exercise yards, rehabilitation programs and classes.

In some Los Angeles jails, for instance, inmates get only three hours a week outside their cells.

That is the legal minimum in California.

The American Bar Assn. recommends at least an hour a day.

California jails also are required to provide only basic and emergency medical care. Treating chronic conditions, geriatric inmates and complex diseases can exceed both the resources and budget of many jail administrators, especially those in small, rural counties.

The state's jail regulations were written "with the mentality that jails were a temporary holding place," said Gary Wron, deputy director of facility standards for the Board of State and Community Corrections.

It will take a revision of those regulations to address the inadequacies, he said. "That's going to need to be addressed," he said. "Out-door time, programming and how inmates spend their day."

Six counties already are fighting lawsuits over conditions in their jails, including allegations of substandard medical care.

Prisoner-rights lawyers say jail administrators are right to worry about more litigation.

The increased time inmates are in those jails will probably make those problems worse, said Don Specter, lead attorney at the Prison Law Office.

The prisoner-rights organization filed the inmate medical care lawsuit that forced Brown to start emptying prisons. The organization is now suing several jails over similar issues.

"Jails were for 30-day stints, and the most you could do was a year. They weren't built for people to exercise. They don't have law libraries. They don't have jobs," Specter said. "A lot of guys would rather go to prison just to have something to do."

Brown initially dismissed sheriff's complaints over the type of criminals being sent to county jails under AB 109 as "political blame shifting."

Democratic leaders in the Legislature went along, killing bills that would have diverted long-haul inmates to state prison.

But in June, the governor agreed there was a problem. He offered to take back the state's longest-serving jail inmates if counties would agree to take state prisoners in return.

The one-for-one swap would have required counties to accept an "equivalent number" of violent prisoners at the tail end of their prison terms. Sending an inmate such as Gaona to state prison for 42 years could have forced Los Angeles to take 42 prisoners with a year left to serve, or 84 prisoners on their last six months, though details were never worked out.

Ahern, the Alameda County sheriff, endorsed the idea, calling it a way to use jails to prepare prisoners for release.

The trade proposal, however, proved unworkable at

County's new/old jail problem

Tues 9-16-13 L.A. Times

IN 2002, LOS ANGELES County Sheriff Lee Baca signed a memorandum of agreement with the Department of Justice in which he undertook to implement sweeping reforms to improve the care of mentally ill inmates held in the nation's largest jail system. A decade later, however, the Justice Department is back, saying it is skeptical that Baca has followed through and initiating a new civil rights probe to determine just what progress has or has not been made.

The civil investigation — prompted in part by allegations that sheriff's deputies have been abusing inmates, including those who are mentally ill, as well as an increase in inmate suicides — comes on top of an ongoing criminal probe by the federal government into the use of excessive force by deputies in the jails. In July, the Justice Department concluded another investigation, finding that L.A. County sheriff's deputies in the Antelope Valley repeatedly violated the civil rights of African Americans and Latinos, including using excessive force against handcuffed individuals.

The Justice Department's concerns, while deeply troubling, are hardly surprising. After all, myriad reports have surfaced in recent years that point to problems in the care of mentally ill inmates. In 2011, for ex-

ample, The Times' Robert Faturechi reported that a sheriff's deputy who graduated at the top of his recruit class quit after just a few weeks, alleging that his supervisor made him beat up a mentally ill inmate. And late last year, the Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence, set up by the county Board of Supervisors, found that according to the department's own data, "30% of the use-of-force incidents in custody" involved inmates with a history of mental illness.

The jails commission went on to note that even though Baca had personally signed the 2002 agreement with the Justice Department, and presumably understood that he needed to comply with it, eight years later he stated in a sworn deposition that he "had never seen this agreement" and "was unaware of any DOJ findings regarding mistreatment of mentally ill inmates in the county jails."

Whether Baca failed to fulfill his obligation under the 2002 agreement remains to be seen. But surely the county shouldn't wait for the Justice Department's findings to address the problem. The Board of Supervisors and Department of Mental Health officials must take a greater role in ensuring that the constitutional rights of mentally ill inmates aren't violated and that treatment or diversion programs are put in place.